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ABSTRACT

Quality work teams that are based on W. Edwards Deming's business-management theories have proliferated at the school and district levels to handle problem solving and decision making. Teams are said to build stronger relationships among those involved in education and, ultimately, to benefit students because more people with broader perspectives help to shape a stronger educational program. This digest explains why schools are using quality teams. It also identifies the most common types of teams, the factors necessary for success, the best strategies for forming a team, and common reasons for their failure. Teams are most likely to be successful when members understand the team's mission, their roles, and the group process, and practice good communication skills. (Contains seven references.) (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Work Teams in Schools

by Lori Jo Oswald

"More is better"—this precept lies behind the burgeoning use of work teams to handle problem-solving and decision-making in schools and school districts. Teams are said to build stronger relationships among those involved in education and, ultimately, to benefit students because more people with broader perspectives help to shape a stronger educational program.

Why Are Schools Using Quality Work Teams?

The proliferation of work teams at the school and district levels stems from education's embracing of W. Edwards Deming's business-management theories, referred to as total quality management (TQM). Deming held that managers should treat workers as partners rather than underlings, for employees will work better together and feel more empowered. The end result—the product—will ultimately be enhanced by such a collaborative arrangement, suggested Deming. Putting Deming's philosophy into practice at the school site is said to reduce competition among individuals and increase the energy necessary for better learning environments (Yvonne Siu-Runyan and Sally Joy Heart 1992).

Teams have several positive effects. First, the more people involved in making a decision, the more likely that decision will be implemented. Second, team members continually learn from one another's fresh ideas. Third, more and better information and actions come from a group of people with various resources and skills. Fourth, there is a better chance that mistakes will be caught and corrected. And finally, risk-taking is more likely because of the collective power of the group.

Nancy Vollmer, school-improvement specialist for the Linn-Benton-Lincoln Education Service District in Corvallis, Oregon, mentions another advantage—a sense of "teamness" (personal communication, August 14, 1995). When a group comes together, she explains, "there is that feeling that it can happen," that the organization can move forward. "All of the sudden there's a flow in the same direction, there's excitement, there's understanding."

What Are the Most Common Types of Teams?

Teams vary in size, mission, and duration. Two major types of teams are identified by Karolyn J. Snyder and Robert H. Anderson (1986): permanent teams and temporary teams. Permanent teams "specialize in a particular function," such as curriculum or age-level teaching. Temporary teams are "organized for a particular short-term purpose and are dissolved when the task is completed." It is important to specify the short- or long-term nature of a team. Nothing can dampen team members' enthusiasm like feeling obligated to continue meeting after their mission has been fulfilled.

The most common kind of team at the district level is the management team, which usually includes the superintendent and other central-office administrators and possibly a board of education member and principals. Management teams are responsible for district-wide policies, missions, or decision-making. The management team might assign specific tasks—such as revising curriculum—to subcommittees.

Management teams are also found at the school level, but may be called administrative teams, leadership teams, or site-based councils. These teams assist principals in decision-making, planning, or problem-solving. Many subcommittees can exist at the school site, such as goal-setting teams, outside-school-activities teams, parent-advisory groups, curriculum-development teams, and the like (Snyder and Anderson).

Vertical teams are also gaining in popularity. Made up of individuals from different levels of an organization, vertical teams are charged with accomplishing a task or engaging in planning. The general missions of vertical teams are consistency and trust-building. Establishing such teams facilitates "the important exchange of information among individuals who share a common purpose but operate on different levels and who thus have very different organizational perspectives," write William G. Cunningham and Donn W. Gresso (1993).

What Factors Ensure a Quality Team?

Two factors are essential to a quality team: bonding and cohesiveness (Cunningham and Gresso). Both establish a sense of team culture. "The strength and potential of the team," write Cunningham and Gresso, "develops once people join together to form a single, united,

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and cohesive culture." A team with a strong culture has several qualities: "purposefulness, pride, confidence, enthusiasm, empowerment, commitment, loyalty, and satisfaction" (Cunningham and Gresso).

Bonding ensures that team members will commit their time, knowledge, skills, and energy to the team and its goals, say Cunningham and Gresso. "Bonded" team members are more enthusiastic, and more loyal to the school and the team. Members can begin this bonding process during the very first meeting, as they evaluate their purpose, goals, roles, and individual and group responsibilities.

Cohesiveness is defined by Cunningham and Gresso as a "sense of togetherness, or community, within a group. A cohesive group is one in which there are incentives for remaining in the group and a feeling of belongingness and relatedness among the members." Cohesive teams are effective teams.

To promote high-quality communication and cohesiveness, the Institute for Educational Leadership (1994) offers the following tips: limit talking time by remembering there are others in the group, don't interrupt, listen actively, allow others to be silent if they wish but try to elicit their views by asking questions or inviting their opinions, encourage rather than dominate, offer only constructive criticism, accept others' opinions even if you don't agree with them, and support those who are unfairly attacked.

What Are the Best Strategies for Forming a Team?

First and foremost, all team members must clearly understand the team's mission. Members should be able to answer the question "Why am I here?" says Margot Helphand (1994). Next, determine team members' roles—especially choosing a facilitator, a recorder, and a process observer. Other essential steps are to outline responsibilities of the team and determine team composition, deadlines, and expected outcomes (Snyder and Anderson).

Hiring a professional to train team members at the outset is a good idea. Effective teams must be aware of both content (the work they do) and process (how they structure the work they have to do). "A part of the culture of a group is to talk about the structure of their work and process," says Vollmer.

Trainers can also enhance team members' understanding of group dynamics and communication skills. One thing members will learn may surprise them: conflict can be good. As Ernie R. Keller, a team trainer in the Wasco-Region 9 Education Service District in The Dalles, Oregon, explains, "Conflict is a powerful engine. Sometimes the fact that there's a conflict might be the very reason people show up for a meeting" (personal communication, August 15, 1995). And conflict often can lead to consensus. Trainers will show teams how and why to reach consensus, as well as to "respect one another's styles, speak honestly, and advocate the team's decisions to our constituencies" (Robert Kessler 1992).

What Are Common Problems Teams Must Overcome?

When teams fail, it's usually because of one of five reasons, says Larry Lozette:

- Members don't understand the team's mission.
- Members don't understand their own roles or responsibilities.
- Members don't understand "how to do their tasks or how to work as part of a team."
- Members don't "buy into" the team's "function, purpose, or goals."
- Members "reject their roles or responsibilities."

Many problems begin with poor communication skills of team members. The Kansas State Board of Education (1992) found that one member can cause problems by being too negative, refusing to reach consensus, attacking other members personally, refusing to take the team's tasks seriously, being too boastful or seeking attention, refusing to participate, or arguing for "only a certain segment of the school community rather than represent everyone with an interest in the school."

Initial training and ongoing assessment can help prevent these problems from occurring. Even if a team does not hire a professional trainer, members can commit to evaluating their mission and roles during the first meeting. Team members must be aware of barriers and learn the skills necessary to hold effective meetings, being a communicative team member, and moving through the process from being congenial to being collaborative. Although it's premature to draw a definitive conclusion, those who are using teams generally agree: It's worth it.

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